TECHNICAL APPENDIX 2:

RMIS RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

During the summer of 2000, researchers at the University of Wyoming contacted outdoor recreation planners in BLM to get their recommendations and feedback on ways to improve the collection and reporting of recreation data in the RMIS database. This information is presented in two sections. Section 1 consists of the State Recreation Planners' recommendations. Section 2 contains suggestions by the University of Wyoming researchers on future data collection efforts that would address data inconsistencies.

Section 1. Interveiws With State Recreation Leads

The following comments were gathered through phone calls and email feedback from BLM State Recreation Leads and those recommended by the State Leads as people who were likely to have relevant suggestions. Email responses are provided largely as written by the respondent. Some site names have been deleted to protect respondent confidentiality. Phone responses are summaries of conversations from interviewer notes. Respondent #1 asked to be identified so that his offer of assistance could be considered, the rest of the respondents will remain anonymous.

Respondent #1:

Mark Goldback
Wyoming State Office Outdoor Recreation Planner
307-775-6102

Email response:

1. The accuracy of the visitor use data in RMIS is very questionable. Field Office Outdoor Recreation Planners are very busy with day-to-day work, and have little time to gather visitor use information. One option would be to contract out the gathering and preparation of visitor use information with the respective State College or University. If a standard service contract for the Bureau was developed for this purpose, this would enhance the consistency and credibility of our visitor use information. I would be glad to help prepare a description of the specifications, deliveries and performances for this sample Visitor Use Information contract.

2. We sometimes are using old methods for gathering visitor use information. The distribution of most recent technologies and applications for conducting visitor use gathering would be helpful. This could be included in the National Training Center Training Course or distributed by memorandum.

3. For RMIS database system to be effectively used, the Field Office Outdoor Recreation Planner (ORP) must have a good understanding of the Bureau's recreation planning program processes. Since we frequently dual-hat ORP positions or fill from other positions within the Bureau, this understanding of the Bureau's recreation planning process is not complete. This results in a RMIS not being accepted and input of recreation data not understood. We must make a commitment to training people new to the recreation program.

Recommended Improvements for Changing the RMIS Database System

1. The primary application for RMIS database remains the annual Public Lands Statistics Report. I recommend that RMIS be changed so it is as valuable to the Field Office as it is the WO. One way this could be accomplished is to modify RMIS so it can be used as a billing system for Special Recreation Permits. Much of the SRP information is already included in RMIS. If a few additional data entry fields (SRP Post Use Report information) along with additional programming modifications, SRP use fee calculations could be made in RMIS and a computerized billing system established. Permittees could submit their Post Use Reports electronically to the BLM, we could assess the use fee and email the permittee their SRP bill.

2. The RMIS Project Manager is making more Standard Reports available in the new RMIS system. I recommend that this practice continue, maybe a "Monthly RMIS Bulletin" would help keep the field aware of the ever-changing RMIS program capabilities.

3. Including the economic values of different recreation activities taking place on public lands in the RMIS would be very helpful when preparing environmental analysis by the Field Offices. A cost benefit ratio could then be obtained, enhancing information availability for the National Environmental Policy Act decision-making process.

4. Our RMIS visitor use data needs to be improved. We should explore whatever changes might be necessary to enhance the reliability and ease the entry of visitor use data. Consistency of the methodology utilized in gathering visitor use data should also be established throughout the Bureau.

Respondent #2:

Phone response:

Field office personnel have trouble collecting data and have to use "best guess." This is not scientific. They usually have to rely on informal visual counts. They set up their own formulas.

Respondent #3:

Phone response:

State office submitted comments at the end of last year to the Washington Office. Those are the only comments this respondent would make.

Respondent #4:

Phone response:

Respondent feels RMIS is going in the right direction and is close to a workable system. There are still things to work on. These are ongoing and are already happening. People in the field are beginning to like RMIS now. Respondent feels they need to go through another season to see how people like the changes already made. Timing is bad for this feedback request. Planners will be using RMIS in September, in-putting end-of-year data. Best feedback will come after Oct. 27.

Summary of state response:
1. System was down so long – needs to be working and available more often
2. Not enough reports and report formats

People want special reports. They were dependent on the old system and wanted report formats like the ones in the old system. They only used the part of RMIS needed for public use statistics. Only a part of what was needed was up and running last year.

People tend to enter data at the last minute, then get frustrated with the system because they don't understand it. They haven't taken the time to work with it and learn it. They blame the system but part of the problem is that they don't take the time to enter data at regular intervals and get to know the system.

Respondent #5:

Phone response:

Respondent is very impressed with RMIS since it went on internet. Seems user friendly, but respondent doesn't have the same use of it as in the West.

Jurisdiction is different from most states - smaller land area. They record data differently. Most states have recreation management areas. In Eastern States, whole state is a recreation management area. They have a flexible program that covers different use requirements. Each tract is a "site." Beyond that, they report as Western states do. They try to find "good homes" for sites as they identify them. They hand over management to local or other federal agencies as long as they manage for public use, not development. They auction off land no one wants.

Visitor use estimates are "pretty wild." Part of the problem is trying to measure use in one state from another state. Access is often limited. If land is surrounded by private land, sites are not used much as a result. Respondent usually talks to surrounding landowners to find out how much a tract is used. Landowners make educated guesses. Estimates can be pretty accurate or not accurate at all.

Another way data collection is different: RMIS allows BLM information sites (kiosks, visitor information centers) to be considered recreation sites. Very reliable visitor use data are recorded at these sites.

Respondent doesn't feel that much can be done to improve either kind of data collection.

Respondent #6:

Phone response:

Respondent says area has a few acres in one small area plus an office site for information. Both are considered activity sites. Stewards monitor use of the site with acreage. They prevent camping and keep track of use. Get pretty good data from stewards. Good counts are made at the information site.

Respondent feels RMIS categories are aimed at on-site use rather than office sites used only for gathering information. Respondent needs an activity category for the time spent looking at information in office sites and visits to visitor centers to get information.

Some sites in the area are islands. Boating is an activity to ***get to*** the site--used as transportation rather than a recreational activity. Public and private lands are mixed together. Public is kept to maintain resource values, fish and wildlife habitat, and cultural sites, but it's hard to send people to them to recreate. They're too scattered.

Respondent #7

Email response:

Gathering RMIS Data:
To be honest, most of the good visitation data comes directly from commercial outfitters, the staff at the [name withheld] Visitor Center and a few other like sources. These sources supply accurate numbers and dates that can be used to figure good visitation numbers. It is at our developed and undeveloped recreation sites that we take unreliable traffic counter numbers, unsubstantiated "trends," and other observations to come up with essentially WAGs on visitation numbers and activities they may have engaged in on public lands. I think Bureau-wide the majority of rec planners have in the past viewed RMIS as a once a year necessary task to complete by early October, so the numbers they input come from somewhere other than sound sources. With all the other priorities we deal with crunching numbers is way down on the list. If some simple methods were available I'd be more inclined to utilize them than if we had systems I'd have to devote time to that isn't available.

Suggestions for improving RMIS:
Somewhere along the line RMiS was sold to management as the way to go for providing a tracking system for visitation numbers/trends/values/etc. As I stated earlier, RMIS is viewed as a “must do” by early October each year effort. While some offices may have

the means of obtaining reliable data most don't. So they input their best estimates. Sometimes these are good, most times they're not. Here we have good numbers for the outfitter use (taking the post-use-reports submitted and extracting numbers to fit the visitation segments of RMIS), the [unnamed] historical site at certain points, and some other special uses (motorcycle poker run, [unnamed] historical site, handcart treks). Since I don't really use RMIS but once a year during the Sept/Oct input phase (occasionally I do pull reports for use in planning documents), I'm not "in tune" with my frustrations with the system so I can't recommend changes.

Respondent #8:

Email response:

Basically, I feel that the RMIS program is a duplication of effort in some areas, and it is intended more for State and Washington Offices to facilitate access to field information for budget and other purposes. I feel that many field offices wouldn't be documenting all the required information in RMIS, but we are required to.

In my case, I deal a lot with SRPs and the RMIS format is not conducive to me tracking information such as trip plans, insurance, and other items so I have developed a spread sheet which meets my needs. I then have to turn around and enter it into RMIS and it seems that information is regularly lost due to problems with formulas, the server, or whatever. I just checked RMIS today and it appears that many of my SRPs are not entered and got lost in cyber space somewhere, so I will have to spend a great deal of time soon reentering all of it which is again a duplication of effort.

I also think that some of the activities need to be modified but can't seem to get folks to change things (some fields of information can only be changed by RMIS administrators). Like adding Dog Trials as a recreation activity. Some activities to add for me would be dog trials, star viewing or astronomy, model rocketry and/or airplanes.

I also feel that RMIS is forcing the field to guess on visitor use in some areas so I wonder how accurate much of the data really is. Same old thing with some offices inflating figures, etc. I just don't believe it tells the whole story for budget purposes and am concerned if it is used too much for this.

Respondent #9

Phone response:

RMIS has had problems for several years. Respondent has had problems inputting data accurately due to problems with linear uses: trails, rivers, site-to-site trips. RMIS can't capture this type of use accurately. This year, RMIS is supposed to be able to handle this. The respondent needs accurate data for these kinds of uses. Rivers are allocated to have so many people at a time. RMIS assigns use to where the trip originated. Activities

actually occur at 2 or 3 or 4 sites along the river. Formulas don't capture the multiple segments through which the trip travels.

Another problem with RMIS formulas: One outfitter may lead so many different types of trips. One formula doesn't cover it. The outfitter may make day-to-day adjustments on where the trip goes depending on water levels.

The respondent purchased Alpha 5 database system to get these data accurately and is still using this program. Will take accurate numbers from Alpha 5 and hard wire them into RMIS if possible. (Hasn't tried this yet.) It's still an extra step and won't work with linear use data.

Respondent says it's nice to have better standards for collecting visitor use data. There are still a lot of numbers that are guesses. Respondent is looking at traffic counters, although it's hard with limited resources. Respondent relies primarily on a good monitoring program. People in the field at least monitor a base to work from. They have a student working in (or on) the program, which helps.

Respondent #10

Phone response:

It works well but we need to do more to validate the data.

Respondent #11:

Email response:

1) Not being an active user, I have no suggestions on improvements or modifications. As the system continues to increase in reliability and user confidence in the numbers, I imagine my use in terms of analysis will increase. But in the recent past, our field folks say they haven't trusted the numbers, so I haven't felt that I can do any level of analysis that I can have confidence in.

2) I would continue to look for opportunities that provide timely data for WO level reports that negate the need for an additional data call and continued coordination with other databases like FIMMS and GIS.

Section 2: University of Wyoming Researchers' Suggestions

There has been little research done regarding recreation expenditures and the economic impacts created by it. This study was administered to find and report existing information regarding recreation expenditures and to make informed estimates of how these expenditures affect local economies. The BLM has had little information on available expenditure information, making some recreation management decisions more difficult. This study has shown that recreation has a positive effect on the economies of states containing BLM land. Wildlife related activities were the most beneficial to the economy by increasing the number of jobs and the level of labor income. The trade and services sectors benefited the most from recreation, receiving the most dollars from recreationists' spending. Utilization of this study will help BLM officials to make more informed decisions about recreation management.

Analysis Team's Summary and Recommendations

1. The BLM should consider defining recreation measurement techniques to allow more consistency across states and sites within the agency. We recommend that the BLM outline criteria for measuring participants (individuals, families, groups) and visitor participation time frames (days, hours, trips) across BLM states and sites.
2. The BLM should consider working cooperatively with other land management agencies (Forest Service, Fish & Wildlife Service) to develop cost effective estimates of recreation expenditures and measures of use. This could standardize use and visitor days, expenditure measures and collection techniques, and improve comparability across agencies.

3. BLM could conduct intercept surveys of recreationists on BLM land to gather accurate information on activity specific recreation participation, including time and length of participation. Data from intercept interviews would strengthen and improve information on resident and non-resident recreation participation. These surveys must be consistent across regional boundaries to ensure accurate comparisons across the BLM.
4. Intercept surveys, suggested in #3, could include questions regarding economic spending by activity. Few recreation activities in the BLM Report 21 categories studied herein had adequate expenditure studies associated with them. Those that did were wildlife viewing, fishing, and hunting. Other activities, such as camping, driving for pleasure, specialized sports, and picnicking, had little associated data from any of the states. Activities with little relevant expenditure data need to be studied further to determine more exact expenditure information. Collecting such data would help BLM managers more accurately estimate direct and indirect economic impacts of recreation on BLM lands.
5. Recreation expenditure studies should be conducted in the states lacking expenditures information. Relevant and current expenditure data was not available for the majority of the Report 21 categories in most states making the estimated impacts less precise on a state by state basis.
6. If the BLM decides to follow through with the recommended surveys, it is also recommended that they develop a database that will keep track of the expenditure information. This could be similar to the Recreation Management System Information (RMIS) that currently tracks the use and participation data for BLM

sites. A standard method of collecting and updating the information should be designated within the system to ensure that the information is realistic, usable, and current.

7. This study, and future data collection and tracking efforts, can be used to aid policy makers in developing recreation budgets and allotting funds with a better understanding of the positive economic impacts of BLM recreation.